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ABSTRACT

This critical review examines 18 books available to the general public about learning disabilities (LD) and offers guidelines for use of these books by professionals. Books are grouped into three categories: those written from the perspective of parents and individuals with learning disabilities, those written from an LD professional's perspective, and juvenile literature. The use of juvenile literature with mainstream teachers, nondisabled students, and students with learning disabilities is recommended. Techniques useful with such groups are discussed including M. E. Crosby's five-step procedure for discussing books and bibliography. Questions for mainstream teachers in book discussions are suggested. (DB)

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A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING DISABILITIES

Paper presented at the Annual
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Running Head: LITERARY VIEW

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Since the birth of the field of learning disabilities, professionals have worked continuously to provide information about its nature. Professional organizations, journals, and textbooks provide volumes of information about learning disabilities. It is to these sources that professionals in the field of learning disabilities turn for knowledge.

Another source of information is books that are available to the general public. These books may be purchased at local bookstores or even in grocery stores. These are books that parents and laypersons may utilize for information. Some are written by individuals with learning disabilities, their parents, and their teachers; others are juvenile books written for children and young adults about characters with learning disabilities.

The second source of information may merit attention from professionals for several reasons. First, it will give professionals some insight into the thoughts of the general public about learning

disabilities. Successful integration of individuals with learning disabilities into mainstream settings depends, in part, on how they are received by others. Second, professionals may need to devote some attention to disseminating accurate and useful information through this medium. Information offered in some sources is as varied as information available in professional literature. Third, professionals may find these books useful in informing individuals with learning disabilities, their parents, regular educators, and the general public about learning disabilities. The books provide a very personal view into the everyday lives of persons with learning disabilities. Finally, the books may be used in teaching about the historical background, varied theoretical positions, and family interactions of learning disabilities.

It is the intent of this manuscript to briefly review some of the books available to the general public about learning disabilities. In addition, how these books might be useful to professionals will be discussed. For the purpose of this manuscript the

books are grouped into those written from the perspective of parents and individuals with learning disabilities, ones written from an LD professional's perspective, and juvenile literature. However, other methods of grouping could be employed (e.g., theoretical orientation, historical). It is also important to note that the potential use of a book is not limited to any one group. Some of the books by parents or for juveniles would be helpful and enlightening to teachers. Conversely, parents may find beneficial the information found in books written by LD professionals.

Books from the Perspective of Parents and Individuals with Learning Disabilites

Books by parents of individuals with learning disabilities and the individuals themselves relay personal, firsthand experiences. They recount events, feelings, concerns, and real-life happenings to provide readers both information and someone with whom to identify.

The magic feather: The truth about special education (Granger & Granger, 1986) depicts the

experiences, perceptions, and feelings of the Grangers, whose son, Alec, was identified as learning disabled through prekindergarten screening. The parents relate how they and other determined parents can overcome the horrors of special education and save their children. In recounting Alec's story, the Grangers present the perils of misdiagnosis, mislabeling, and mistreatment at the hands of educators, psychologists, and other professionals typically involved in the education of students with learning disabilities. The authors depict schools, educators, and support personnel as fraudulent, abusive, discriminatory, and restrictive. Whether this is accurate or not, teachers and other professionals need to be made aware of how they might be perceived and deal with parents accordingly.

Several books written by parents provide information about general characteristics and identification procedures (Bloom, 1990; Fisher & Cummings, 1990; Silver, 1988). One such book is The misunderstood child (Silver, 1988), an encyclopedia of information about learning disabilities, in adolescence, and adulthood. As is typical of

encyclopedias, a thumbnail sketch of each of a wide array of topics is offered. Persons who wish more detailed information must consult additional sources. The content is arranged in four sections: definition of a learning disability; associated characteristics and information processing; psychological, social, and emotional development from both the "normal" and learning disabled perspectives; and diagnosis and treatment of a learning disability.

The survival guide for kids with LD (Fisher & Cummings, 1990) could have also been placed in the group of juvenile books, however it was written by the parent of an individual with a learning disability. In addition, Rhoda Cummings is a professional in the field of learning disabilities. The book is written for children and includes chapters on definition of LD, which the authors call "learning difference"; nature and types of LD; history of the field of learning disabilities; what LD does not mean (not retarded); how to handle teasing and social situations and getting along better at school and at home. The final chapter, "What Happens When You Grow Up" guides the reader into

thoughts about the future. The chapter describes nine adult responsibilities and provides a list of things that can be done to get ready for being an adult. A special section of the book is written to parents and teachers. It contains information on learning resources for individuals with learning disabilities, ways for helping with depression, and support organizations.

An area that is beginning to receive attention is the adult learning disabled individual. Barbara Meister Vitale (1986) described her life as a successful adult with learning problems in Free flight: Celebrating your right brain. To her credit is a master's degree and the authorship of several books. Yet, as a child she experienced school failure; she did not learn to read at the appropriate age. Although she was not labeled dyslexic or learning disabled, her story suggests that she exhibited many of the school skills and behaviors that are typical of students who are so labeled. Ms. Vitale emphasizes the fact that different is not necessarily dysfunctional and that there is life beyond school. She views her difference

as a potential strength that is the result of being right brain dominant rather than "dumb" or "damaged". She discusses strategies for fostering success in a world where most learners are left-brain dominant. She points out the unique potential contributions the right-brain individual can make to society.

Books from the Perspective of LD Professionals

Professionals share their experiences of working with students with learning disabilities, relating their feelings, anxieties, frustrations, and successes as well as by depicting programs and techniques designed for individuals with learning disabilities. Mary MacCracken tells of her experiences as the teacher of five children with learning disabilities in Turnabout children (1986). She portrays each child as unique in terms of age, sex, background, personal qualities, and type and degree of learning disability. Despite their uniqueness, the children share some common characteristics: feeling dumb, unlovable, worthless, and unable to learn.

In MacCracken's private practice as a counselor, she works with these and other students with learning

disabilities. The message she broadcasts is that there are problems with the current process of handling students with learning disabilities in the public schools, and that students need more than what is available in some school districts. Yet, it is clear that she does not see the students' plight as hopeless. She indicates that learning disabled students can learn and feel good about themselves, and she stresses the importance of an individual's self-concept. Her point is that the teacher's role of encouragement, support, and love is important in the academic remediation process.

Along the same line, Greene (1987) provides a "no roses" picture of the experiences of a learning disabled student in Learning disabilities and your child. The primary message is that children with learning disabilities experience repeated failure. The failure cycle has a disastrous impact on a child's development. The long-range implications are discussed. The author stresses the fact that a child may employ some less-than-desirable strategies such as quitting or acting out in an effort to escape the cycle

unless adults intervene. The ramifications of early identification of both learning and emotional problems are considered. A parent's role in the process of identifying and minimizing a learning disability and the failure cycle is emphasized. According to Greene, a tool for parental intervention is communication.

Teachers, other professionals, and parents recognize the lack of acceptance in both academic and social adjustment. The reality of coping on a day-to-day basis is difficult. In No one to play with, Osman (1982) takes the position that social acceptance is at least as important to the student with a learning disability as academic success. She cites numerous examples of behaviors exhibited by individuals with learning disabilities who have social skills deficits and discusses both the long-term and immediate consequences. The role of intervention in ensuring gains is emphasized. Through her discussion, the reader is provided with strategies for facilitating the acquisition of necessary social skills and compensating for deficit skills.

For those who think they may be working with a gifted student who is learning disabled, Vail and Davidson (1987) offer information in Smart kids with school problems. The learning and emotional characteristics of such students and their implications are considered. Diagnosis, test score interpretation, and test use are addressed. The difficulty in understanding inconsistencies in ability and performance across areas is underscored. Vail and Davidson explore strengths and weaknesses of five methods of teaching and learning for this type of student. A unique feature of this book is its attention to learning disabled students as they mature and enter higher education.

Cohen (1974) recounts his experiences as an optometrist specializing in perceptual training in Bets wishs doc: A dynamic approach to learning disabilities. He discusses learners with academic problems and the steps he took to assist them in both school and life situations. The book presents information about perceptual training, an approach to the treatment of learning disabilities that is seldom employed today.

However, questions about the "hows" and "whys" are still raised and readers may want such a firsthand view of perceptual training. Beyond perceptual training, Cohen's view of individuals with learning disabilities as human beings and professionals as concerned individuals who strive to facilitate the achievement of those with whom they work is timely.

Juvenile Literature about Individuals with Learning Disabilities

As with books written by parents, juvenile books range in accuracy of information and understandability. Books written about children and adolescents with learning disabilities examine the cause of the learning disability, experiences of academic failure, remediation, affective development, and family reaction.

Review of juvenile books

In Kelly's creek by Doris Buchanan Smith (1975), nine-year old Kelly is said to have perceptual problems. He practices tracing geometric figures and walking on balance beams in a special classroom for one hour each day with six other children from his class.

Kelly's parents and teachers see his academic failures as a lack of effort even though they are aware of his learning disability. Kelly's mother works with him daily on tracing the geometric figures. After questioning the efficacy of the exercises, Kelly is told that they will help his brain, hands, and feet learn to work together. Kelly has one adult friend, but no friends in his class or neighborhood. He is physically uncoordinated, thus he cannot play football with the other boys. His lack of prowess and academic inadequacies make him feel negatively about himself. The adult friend is a college student who, like Kelly, has an interest in marine life. His passion for knowledge in this area serves as Kelly's area of strength. The reader is led to reflect on how the main character can be so gifted in one area and yet not be able to learn to read.

In Stella Pevsner's Keep stompin' till the music stops (1977), the mother of the main character Richard, also works diligently toward remediating her child's learning disability. Richard's problems are said to be perceptual in nature, but, unlike Kelly's, the

remediation is academic, working on specific academic weaknesses. Wanting to avoid having Richard placed in a self-contained class, his mother works with him daily during the summer on math and spelling. He previously received special services in a resource room. Richard's mother is sympathetic and pained by the teasing he has endured. She is portrayed as understanding the frustration he feels when he fails. Conversely, Richard's father often appears unsympathetic toward his difficulties and blames many of his son's troubles on an overindulgent mother. The issue of labeling is highlighted, especially when differentiating between a learning disability and mental retardation.

Discovering the nature and characteristics of a learning disability (described as minimal brain dysfunction) helps sixteen year-old Nick Swansen, in Probably still Nick Swansen by Virgina Wolff, (1988) to better understand himself and his difficulties. Some of Nick's troubles are typical of any adolescent (peer pressure, relating to the opposite sex, and parents) but he believes them to be a result of his disability.

Nick has been in Room 19 (a self-contained class) for three years and through observation has recognized the differences between the students in his class and other students in his school. "Going-Up" parties were given to those in Room 19 who left special education for regular classes. In Nick's view, parties marked the time when somebody would stop being "special ed" and start being just like everyone else. Like with the main character in Kelly's creek, the reader is allowed to see the academic puzzle that a learning disability sometimes presents. Nick's area of strength is his knowledge of amphibians. Nick's parents are portrayed as helpful, supportive, and understanding.

Sam Mott is the central character in Do bananas chew gum? (Gilson, 1980). Unlike the characters in the previous books, Sam has many friends. He has learned to make jokes about himself before others have a chance to tease or laugh at him because of his academic failures. Most of the other characters see him as a joker and a funny person. Sam is in the sixth grade and has been to five schools in five states since kindergarten as his father searches for the perfect job. Early in the

mornings, when they think Sam is asleep, Sam's parents frequently argue about his problems. Sam's mother feels that they must face up to the fact that he is retarded. Sam's father had problems in school and believes that Sam will make it just as he did. In each school Sam's problems were discovered, but his family moved and special education services have been inconsistent. Sam's strengths are in the area of addition and memory.

The main characters in many of the juvenile books about children or adolescents with learning disabilities are boys. This supports the fact that there is a higher incidence of learning disabilities among boys (Learner, 1988). However, in Will the real Gertrude Hollings please stand up? (Greenwald, 1983) the main character is a girl. As has Sam Mott, Gertrude has moved from school to school both public and private--each with a different philosophy of teaching, but a common factor of labeling her as "dumb" (classmates) or "unmotivated" (teachers). One of the major focuses of the book is labels given to exceptional persons by society.

Gertrude is troubled by the multitude of labels that accompany a learning disability. She sees herself as a different Gertrude in all her environments and in relationships with others (her parent's Gertrude, the school's Gertrude, and Albert's Gertrude). Throughout the story she struggles to find the real Gertrude. Albert, Gertrude's cousin, is gifted and also struggles with labels assigned by society. He is a year younger than Gertrude, but they are both in fourth grade. Their skills, abilities, and personalities vary considerably.

Gertrude's parents are loving and supportive. She likes being at home with them, because at home she is loved and bright and has no labels. Mr. and Mrs. Hollings are called away to Greece and Gertrude is left with Albert and his parents. During her stay, both Albert and Gertrude discover their real selves outside the labels they have been assigned.

For additional juvenile literature about persons with learning and other disabilities Notes from a different drummer (Baskin & Harris, 1977), More notes from a different drummer (Baskin & Harris, 1984), and

Accept me as I am (Friedberg, Mullins & Sukiennik, 1985) may be consulted. The two books by Baskin and Harris review juvenile fiction about individuals with disabilities. Each entry includes bibliography information, and a review and analysis of the book. Friedberg et al. have compiled a similar resource on books of juvenile nonfiction on impairments and disabilities.

Using juvenile literature in school settings

Juvenile literature can be used with three groups in the school setting--mainstream teachers, nondisabled students, and students with learning disabilities. Using juvenile literature to inform mainstream teachers about students with disabilities does not appear to be documented in the literature. Several researchers have proposed or documented the use of literature as a means of modifying nondisabled students' attitudes toward their disabled peers (Bauer, 1985; Greenbaum, Varas & Markel, 1980; Litton, Banbury & Harris, 1980; Salend & Moe, 1983). Juvenile literature has also been used to help students with disabilities gain a better understanding of themselves (Gerber & Harris, 1983;

Lenkowsky & Lenkowsky, 1978; Russell & Russell, 1979).

The following techniques can be utilized with the three groups to provide information about learning disabilities and to help generate feelings of empathy in mainstream teachers and nondisabled students.

Crosby's five-step procedure for discussing books.

In the 1963 edition of Reading ladders for human relations, Crosby proposes a five-step procedure for discussing books. The first step is to retell the story. During this step the teacher helps students to identify incidents, feelings, and relationships under consideration. Initially, when asked to tell what happened students may recall specific events. The teacher may need to guide students' thinking by asking such questions as "What do you think the author meant to tell us by this event?" Younger students might be asked to draw a picture of what happened in the story. Older children may retell a particular point or incident in the story as vividly as possible in their own words.

The second step is to probe for changes in a specific character's feelings, relationships, and behavior. Crosby states that the purpose of this step is to help students identify more vividly with the feelings of the characters in the book. Questions that the teacher might ask include the following: What did the character do? Why did he do that? In what ways did he show his feelings? How do you feel about what he did? How would you have felt had you been in his shoes?

The third step is to identify similar incidents drawn from the experiences of the students or from other stories. During this step, the students are allowed to describe incidents of similar emotional content and to generalize about them. Questions which may help to facilitate this step are: Have you seen something like this happen? When? Where? How was the incident you described similar to or different from this?

The fourth step to explore the consequences of certain behaviors or feelings. Students recount what happened in a given relationship in the story as a

result of some specific behavior. Teacher generated questions during this step include: In what ways did the character's feelings or behaviors make a difference? Who in the story had a happier or more difficult time because of this situation?

The final step is to draw a conclusion and to generalize about the consequences of certain behaviors or feelings. Students are given an opportunity to decide which of several alternatives is more desirable or helpful. Questions that may help to meet the goal of this step include: Which kind of behavior, feeling, or arrangement makes the situation better for people? If you could relive one of your own experiences, what would you do differently? Why? How can we help people choose what will foster better relationships between people? What would you do to make the situation different?

This procedure might be used by mainstream teachers after reading to a class or assigning one of the books reviewed in the previous section. It might also be used with students with learning disabilities to help them better understand themselves and their

learning disability, a process frequently referred to as bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy: Its definition and background.

Edwards and Simpson (1986) trace the birth of the term bibliotherapy to 1916. Since that time the concept has been promoted by a variety of disciplines, including counseling/psychology (Bauer, 1985; Hoagland, 1972), library science (Baskin & Harris, 1977, 1984; Friedberg, Mullins & Sukiennik, 1985), and education (Salend & Moe, 1983; Litton, Banbury & Harris, 1980).

Rongione (cited in Edwards and Simpson, 1982) proposed six goals for bibliotherapy. First, it should teach people to think constructively and positively. Second, it should encourage people to talk freely about their problems. Third, it should analyze their attitudes and modes of behavior. Fourth, it should point out that there are many solutions to a problem. Fifth, it should stimulate an eagerness to find an adjustment that will lessen conflict within society. Sixth, bibliotherapy should assist people in comparing their problems with those of others.

Hoagland (1972) postulates bibliotherapy can help children in their personality development. He suggests that in order for bibliotherapy to be effective, the reader must undergo three phases during or immediately after reading a book. Identification, the first phase, requires the reader to become personally involved and identify themselves in the literature or see a situation similar to some of his own situations. Catharsis, the second phase, requires the reader to release emotional tension surrounding the problem. Insight, the final phase, requires the reader to integrate intellectual perceptions with emotional drives. A better understanding or awareness of problems is gained through empathizing with the character or plot.

Mercer and Mercer (1989) define bibliotherapy as a teaching technique in which reading materials are used to help students better understand themselves and their problems. The focus of this definition seems to imply an information-gathering process as opposed to a therapeutic process.

Lenkowsky (1987) reviewed and analyzed literature on bibliotherapy, and suggested a conceptual framework that examines bibliotherapy in four ways: as a self-actualization therapy, a strategy for attitudinal change, a method for self-concept improvement, and an instructional/didactic tool. He concluded that there was little systematic demonstration of the efficacy of bibliotherapy and cautions against special education utilization without controlled study. He does, however, recognize the value of understanding the principles, philosophy, and practices of bibliotherapy for those personnel working with children who may profit from the exposure to reading materials directed to their specific problems.

Russell and Russell (1979) suggest caution to those using bibliotherapy with children with emotional disturbances. The authors state that it should overlap and coordinate with other ventures into teaching in the affective domain. They emphasize that effective use of bibliotherapy is dependent on the student reading books. Along with motivating students to read, teachers are encouraged to use other techniques such as

positive reinforcement, self-charting of books read, and the Premack Principle to inspire reading. It is also suggested that students should already be reading freely and with a purpose before bibliotherapy is used.

Using juvenile literature with mainstream teachers.

As indicated earlier, books written about children and adolescents with learning disabilities examine the cause of the learning disability, experiences of academic failure, remediation, affective development, and family reaction. These topics are very similar to those covered in inservices provided for mainstream teachers. Juvenile books might be utilized as support materials for inservices because of the firsthand account they offer. Having mainstream teachers read juvenile literature about students with learning disabilities will by no means provide comprehensive knowledge about learning disabilities and feelings of empathy for the students integrated into their classroom. However, reading these books may be useful as a part of the inservice process.

The following questions can be used to guide mainstream teachers as they read and compare the characters in books reviewed above.

1. What academic behaviors are displayed by the main character? (ACADEMIC CHARACTERISTICS)
2. What social behaviors are displayed by the main character? (SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS)
3. What physical characteristics does the main character portray? (PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS)
4. What caused the main character's learning problems? (CAUSATION/THEORY)
5. How were the main character's abilities assessed? (ASSESSMENT)
6. Where did the main character receive his instruction? (SERVICE DELIVERY)
7. What was being done to help the main character be a better learner or to improve his academic skills? (REMEDIATION)
8. What was the family's reaction to the main character and his problems? (FAMILY REACTION)

These questions could be used to generate group discussion on a variety of topics including those indicated parenthetically.

Summary

The books reviewed here provide more than an entertaining perspective of a learning disability. They provide a valuable resource to professionals who deal with individuals with learning disabilities. When learning disabilities are studied from a factual textbook approach, disabled persons, their families, peers, and professionals gain useful information about many aspects including characteristics, test score interpretation, and social and educational expectations and implications. This information is important because it provides the basis for appropriate modification and implementation of learning and coping strategies. However, factual information is not sufficient.

To maximize the education of persons with learning disabilities and minimize the problems, the personal perspective must also be considered. The books described above provide such a perspective. The nature

of these books offers the reader a firsthand view of the day-to-day joys and frustrations of persons with learning disabilities. Although some textbook information may be included, the "how it feels" component is the distinct contribution of these books. The reader is given the opportunity to walk in the shoes of a person with a disability. In addition to serving as a source of information for professionals, these books form a literary pool to which parents and others who are involved with persons with learning disabilities can be referred for a unique perspective of learning disabilities.

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